

## The Da Vinci Code

By Harry Forbes and David DiCerto  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK (CNS) -- The screen adaptation of Dan Brown's best-seller has arrived amid unprecedented secrecy and fanfare, and the resulting film is pretty much what everyone expected: a glossy, well-acted, mostly fast-moving thriller. Regrettably, however, just about all the spurious historical, artistic, and theological misstatements from the poorly researched book have been left intact.

For the few who may not be aware, "The Da Vinci Code" (Columbia) tells the story of Harvard "religious symbologist" Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) on the run from Capt. Bezu Fache (Jean Reno) of the French police after the grisly murder of Jacques Sauniere (Jean-Pierre Marielle), a curator of the Louvre museum, whose naked body is found spread-eagle, positioned like Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man." Before he died, Sauniere left additional clues, hidden in the surrounding works of art, including the Mona Lisa, on which he cryptically scrawled, "So Dark the Con of Man."

With Sauniere's granddaughter, Sophie Neveu (heavily accented French actress Audrey Tautou), a police cryptologist, in tow, Langdon gradually pieces together the motives for the killing, which would seem to implicate the Catholic Church in a centuries-old conspiracy (billed as "the greatest cover-up in human history").

Meanwhile, there's Silas (Paul Bettany), a crazed albino monk-assassin from Opus Dei, who, under the direction of his mentor and head of that Catholic institution, Bishop Aringarosa (Alfred Molina), is on the trail of a so-called "keystone" that contains a map revealing the location of the Holy Grail, which turns out to be not the cup of legend but something quite different. (In the film version, Bishop Aringarosa is more villain than dupe.)

Director Ron Howard delivers the requisite shadowy suspense and chase sequences through the Louvre and the streets of Paris, London, and Scotland -- much of it on location -- peppering the action with several flashback scenes to illustrate some of the backstory which might otherwise have made the film even more talky than it is. (These range from digital recreations of the Crusades and the Council of Nicaea to glimpses of Silas' harsh upbringing.)

The convoluted plot may be confusing for those unfamiliar with the book. While the performances, including that of Sir Ian McKellen as Grail scholar Sir Leigh Teabing, won't disappoint fans of the novel, the underlying theology -- particularly as it questions Jesus' divinity and its fanciful pagan-flavored notions of "inherited" divinity -- not to mention, secondarily, the maligning of Opus Dei, is deeply abhorrent.

It is McKellen who, in a lengthy monologue, glibly explains to the initially skeptical Langdon and Sophie that "the greatest story ever told was all lies" and that Jesus wasn't "the son of God ... or even the nephew." With a remarkably straight face, he also expounds on how the feminine-looking dinner guest in Leonardo's "Last Supper" painting is not the Apostle John, but rather Mary Magdalene.

As the plot plays out, villainies are revealed and some assumptions disproved, but none of Teabing's allegations are refuted.

We needn't regurgitate the litany of topics where Brown's story makes unfounded claims: the origins of Christianity, early views of Jesus' divine nature and his relationship to Mary Magdalene, the church's alleged suppression of women, the selection of the four Gospels, later gnostic texts, the Council of Nicaea, the emperor Constantine, the Knights Templar, and Leonardo himself. Akiva Goldsman's script reins in some of Brown's more baldly bogus statements, couching them in the

speculative language of "theories" rather than "facts," but still gets many of the latter dead wrong, including the reasons for the demise of the Templars.

In a further example of softening the book's heretical edge, Howard has Langdon question Teabing's contentions. Near the end, in a case of too little too late, Langdon -- who, we are told, was raised Catholic -- even admits to some vestigial faith.

The film invites audiences to "seek the truth." But the only truth would seem to be that there is no truth. "Why does it have to be human or divine? Maybe human is divine?" Langdon ruminates about Jesus, declaring that "what matters is what you believe."

If Brown had merely attempted to resurrect some of the darker chapters in church history, unflattering or not, that might have been fair game.

But these egregious assertions, gussied up in the trappings of a Robert Ludlum thriller, are different in that they cut to the core of Christian doctrine. Speculative fantasy is one thing, insensitivity to people's basic beliefs is another.

The sensationalized portrayal of Opus Dei --whose admirable mandate is to serve God to the fullest in one's everyday activities -- as a creepy secret society given to grotesque acts of self-mutilation and a hotbed of intrigue could almost be amusing if it weren't so deeply offensive, especially since many will mistake this caricature for truth.

Though Howard, Hanks and producer Brian Grazer have insisted the film is merely fiction, it does seem irresponsible of all parties involved not to have changed the name of Opus Dei in light of the obvious falsehoods, or even provided some kind of disclaimer.

The public loves conspiracy tales, especially when they involve powerful institutions, and the Catholic Church is a favorite target, even if the "bad guys" are shown not to be representative of the whole.

Sophie's line that "your God doesn't forgive murderers, he burns them" lacks even a rudimentary understanding of Christianity. Early on, Bishop Aringarosa remarks that some people fear what they don't understand. It seems others make movies about it.

Partly subtitled.

The film contains violence including brutal murders, crude language, irreverent underpinning, rear male nudity, scenes of corporal mortification, a fleeting hint of prostitution, and a glimpse of ritualistic sex. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is O -- morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 -- parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

- - -

Forbes is director and DiCerto is on the staff for the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

END

Copyright (c) 2006 Catholic News Service/USCCB. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or otherwise distributed.

CNS • 3211 Fourth St NE • Washington DC 20017 • 202.541.3250